

ICC Conference: “Business Etiquette Around the World: Japan”

Reiko Morris, Immigration Compliance Specialist / International Student Advisor
Northeastern University International Student & Scholar Institute

(1) Language issues: How formally you address colleagues and superiors?; How do you ask for help or information? (Direct or more indirect)

In general, people in Japan, tend to address something indirectly, especially at business setting. Traditionally, “indirectness” is more valued and honored than expressing issues and feelings directly. In this regard, you need to be very keen on the “social relationship” between you and the other party when you are addressing something.

How do you “judge” the social relationship between you and the other party? That is based on age, position or rank at the organization and gender (although, this has been changing over the last 10 to 15 years in Japan – the younger generation does not care much about gender issues in society in general.)

As an adult/professional, you must be able to speak in appropriate Japanese language forms that show how formal/polite or casual you are to the other party, called *Keigo* (敬語). There are three different level of politeness in *Keigo*;

Sonkeigo (尊敬語), respectful language;

Kenjōgo (謙讓語), humble language (or "modest language"); and

Teineigo (丁寧語), polite language.

Mastering *Keigo* in written and oral communication is a must as a professional business person. However, when you describe your organization to the a party who does not work with you, you need to describe someone who works there in humble form; e.g.: *Heisha* (弊社) (“my/our company”: direct translation – our humble/small/modest company) instead of *Kaisha* (会社, “company”)

In a Japanese business setting, unless your company uses English as its primary language, a high level of proficiency in Japanese language may be critical in order to understand the complicated use of language usage, particularly its politeness or level of directness.

(2) Work styles: Do people generally work independently or more in groups? Are people collaborative or competitive with each other?

As most of Japanese companies have had a tradition of “permanent employment (*Shushin Koyo* 終身雇用)” many Japanese people still consider their work as a life-long assignment/duty for them to pursue. In this kind of employment, many Japanese business people see their company as their “family,” and knowing how to be a team member is still considered very important quality for people to have as employee in Japan.

However, after the economic bubble burst in the early 90s, Japanese employees work changed drastically due to increasing lay-offs and the shifting of many companies’ “hiring style”: from getting full/benefitted employees to hiring contract-based temporary workers (called “*Haken* 派遣” employees in Japanese.)

Permanent Employment (Source: Wikipedia)

Regular, "permanent" employees work for a single employer, and are paid directly by that employer. In addition to their wages, they often receive benefits like subsidized health care, paid vacations, holidays, sick time, or contributions to a retirement plan. Regular employees are often eligible to switch job positions within their companies. Even when employment is "at will," regular employees of large outfits are generally protected from abrupt job termination by severance policies, like advance notice in case of layoffs, or formal discipline procedures. They may be eligible to join a union, and may enjoy both social and financial benefits of their employment.

(3) Do people generally become friends with and go out after work with colleagues?

Due to the traditional "social relationship" values (e.g.: younger employees need to be polite to older employees at work,) Japanese business people have a tendency to create a rapport among the same generation. In general, people who were hired in the same year call each other as "Doh-ki 同期 (direct translation: "beginning in the same year." Like "the Class of 2011", for example, in American colleges, your Doh-Ki employees will be your friends at work as long as you are with them at the same company.

Hierarchy is very significant in Japanese society. So, it is not common for a younger employee to be friends with his/her superiors (older employees.) Yet, the younger one may see the older one as their "Sensei 先輩 (direct translation: elder/older one. Kohai 後輩 is a word for younger one or less experienced one)." This word is also used among students when they see their hierarchy at schools (from elementary school to University,) especially athletic clubs or other social groups.

However, there is something called "obligated" drinking gathering/party (Nomi-Kai 飲み会 or Settai 接待) in the business setting in Japan. In a normal Nomi-Kai situation, somebody invites employees at the company to go out together after work to share some drinks. If your Sensei (elder/supervisor/older employee) is organizing the Nomi-kai, it is not easy for you to be absent from the gathering – because the organizer is older than you in the company hierarchy. If the organizer is either younger than you or the same age, pressure will be less intense, so you may decide if you want to join the party or not.

Settai is mostly for employees to "entertain" a business client for a dinner or some drinks. At this occasion, you are expected to be a great host for your client in order to achieve your business goal or express your appreciation for closing a contract. This is solely for business rapport building and not for your personal pleasure.

(4) What is the common dress code?

In general, the common dress code among Japanese companies is formal: suit with a tie for men and dress/ suit for women. There are still many Japanese companies (even today) have uniforms for their female employees. I used to wear uniform (like that in next page) when I was working at a Japanese private university as an administrative assistant in early 1990s. It is kind of "unspoken" rule among Japanese business women to wear make-up when they work. Having long hair (men) or dying hair too much of a lighter color than the original color has become common among young Japanese business men/women over the last 20 years, and is considered OK in the business setting unless the color is outstandingly bright (like blond.)



(5) How is the work space organized?

Although it varies according to where you work, most Japanese offices/companies have one huge floor and put several partitions for its employees to provide them with a cubicle. In my personal experience, each section has a desk for a supervisor and his/her subordinates' desks are located in the same section with the supervisor. Although some offices provide separate partitions for each staff, it is very common that many employees work at the same space without any walls or privacy, so the supervisor can see all of his/her staff working in front of him/her. This could be based on their value for collectiveness as a group/organization.

(6) On what basis do people get promotions?

This is one of the most changed things in the Japanese business world. Traditional "permanent employment (or *Shushin Koyo* 終身雇用: direct translation, Employment for life" is no longer common in Japan – people can be laid-off any time like in the US or other western countries, and getting a full time/benefitted position at a company is getting extremely competitive.

It used to be very common for an employee to stay with one company for life until retirement at age 65, and every 3-5 years people get promotions. A company used to pay a good "retirement pension" as well when an employee retired – the amount varies according to the length of employment and the company policy.

But, this business tradition is rapidly fading away in today's Japan. These days, most Japanese companies evaluate their employees' business performances and promotions based on those evaluations. It is normal that some employees won't get promoted even 3-5 years after they got a position. They are also hiring more "*Haken* 派遣 (contract-based temporary employee, without benefits)" staff instead of full time employees. Due to the national health insurance system in Japan, the temp staff does not need to be given health insurance and other benefits from their company. However, the work load that the temp staff takes on every day is almost the same work load that FT employees carry. This is a serious social issue for

today's Japan: how to protect those temp workers' rights and make them full time employees instead of keeping them in their current positions.

(7) Are you expected to challenge your boss or not?

(8) Are you expected to come up with original ideas?

This varies depending on the "business culture" at the organization you belong to. These days, there are more westernized companies in Japan, and employees' independence and directness are valued and considered "positive," contrary to Japanese traditional values.

(9) How important is time in terms of arriving at work, meeting deadlines. etc.?

Finishing projects and assignments in a timely manner is very critical in a Japanese business setting – not only for productivity but also for saving face. One of the great examples of this is news the broadcast explaining when trains arrive late or cancel their services temporary. People in Japan expect all public transportation companies (subways, bus systems and major train systems) to operate their business on time all the time. For example, when the famous bullet trains, *Shinkan-sen* 新幹線 of the JR (the Japan Railroad) are delayed 5 - 10 minutes from their regular schedules, it is not rare at all that people will have a news report on TV . Your sensitivity for time would directly affect your reputation at work. No matter what you do, you are expected to be on time.

(10) Are people more interested in meeting short term goals quickly or making long term relationships?

(11) Decision making: Do people/companies take risks and like change or are decisions based more on tradition?

Because hierarchy in any social setting is highly considered, you and your business client's relationship would also carefully observed by both parties and determined over a long period of time as far as business goes. Business rapport building is a very critical process among Japanese companies. Although it is certainly changing in style (becoming more westernized) lately, making "indirect" communication between business clients is still a huge part of fundamental Japanese business relationship building and is considered to be "proper/good business manners." The purpose of indirect communication and wording is mainly to avoid potential conflicts. This is heavily based on the traditional Japanese communication style.

At company, any managers/supervisors are expected to make important decisions. However, this could vary depending on that company's business culture.